

# “YOU ARE GOING TO DIE AND WE’RE TAKING YOUR PROPERTY”

Interviews with Tigray  
refugees in Eastern Sudan

December 2020



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## GLOSSARY & ACRONYMS

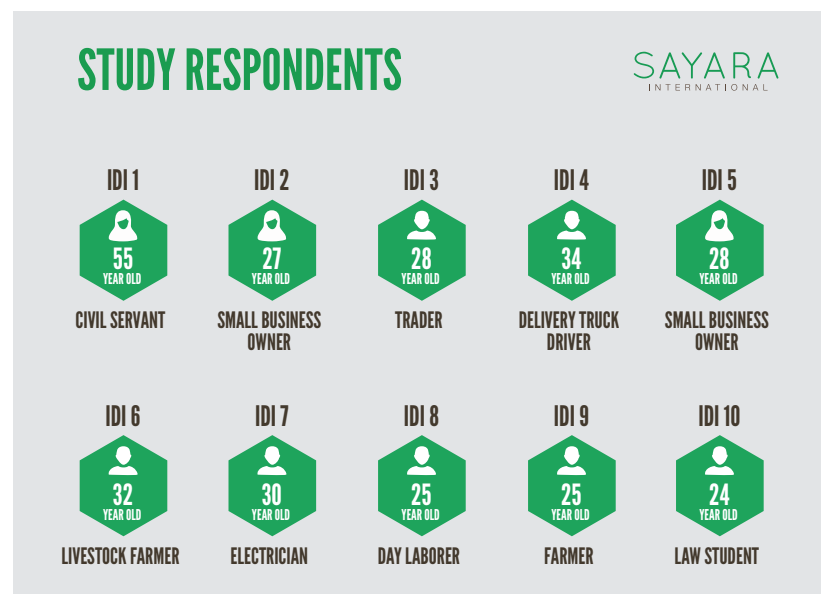
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defense Force
Fano	Ethnic Amhara militia group
Salugat	People living on the street, sometimes also implying thieves
Shabia	Term for the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front, used as reference to any Eritrean forces
TPLF	Tigray People’s Liberation Front
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Welketut, welketetu	Those who collaborated with the Amhara

## ABOUT THIS RESEARCH BRIEF

**Sayara International** is a global development research company with headquarters in Washington, D.C. and a local office in Khartoum, Sudan. Sayara considers investing in local staff, experts, and communities – as well as developing a deep understanding of local conditions – to be an integral component of our work. When the crisis erupted in Ethiopia's Tigray State in November 2020, Sayara deployed its research network to reach out to refugees coming across the border and document their experiences. Sayara believes that this type of self-funded research is a critical part of our responsibility as members of the international development community and as global citizens in the countries and communities where we work.

## METHODS

This research brief is the result of in-depth interviews with Tigrayan refugees who have recently arrived in Sudan through Hamdayet, Kassala State, Sudan. Sayara developed a short qualitative interview guide and worked closely with a local expert to identify ten recently arrived refugees for in-depth phone interviews about their experiences. All Sayara's work is based on a conflict-sensitive 'Do No Harm' approach. Given the refugees' recent experiences of violence and displacement, our interview guide and research process were designed to ensure confidentiality, avoid retraumatizing participants, and prevent any undue risk.



## BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT

The Tigray region is a province in northern Ethiopia, historically populated primarily by Tigrinya-speakers but including a few ethnic minorities from other states including Amhara and Oromo. Most inhabitants are Orthodox Christians, though religious minorities include a Muslim sub-group (Jeberti) and a small Catholic population.

Ethiopia experienced a dramatic shift in its power structure in 2018 when Abiy Ahmed became Prime Minister, marking an end to almost 30 years of political rule dominated by the Tigray People's Liberation Front. Abiy's leadership led to rapid changes to Ethiopia's political economy, and fractures in Ethiopia's delicately balanced system of ethnic federalism became increasingly pronounced. Violence and ethnic conflict began sparking around the country. In Tigray, many of Abiy's reforms were perceived as punitive – in particular, the peace accord with Eritrea. A dispute over postponement of planned elections in August 2020, and Tigray's insistence on holding elections despite federal COVID prohibitions, led to rapidly escalating tensions and mutual accusations of illegitimacy.

On November 4, 2020, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed ordered a military offensive against regional forces in Tigray in response to an attack by Tigray on a military base housing federal government troops, leading to widespread fighting across the region and an exodus of refugees.

## REFUGEE CRISIS IN EASTERN SUDAN

As a result of the ongoing conflict between Ethiopian federal forces and the Tigray state forces, an average of 1,500 refugees from Ethiopia are crossing into Eastern Sudan every day - 45% of them are children.<sup>1</sup> Between November 7 and December 11, 2020, more than 49,878 Ethiopian refugees have crossed into Sudan through points in Kassala and Gedaref states, as well as a new location further south at Aderafi, according to UNHCR. It is estimated that violence in northern Ethiopia could displace more than 200,000 people into neighboring Sudan over the coming months, generating a rapidly escalating humanitarian crisis.<sup>2</sup>

Hamdayet town, on the banks of the Tekeze River, has become a transit center and settlement site for refugees. Um Rakuba camp in Gedaref State's Eastern Galabat locality has been designated by the Sudanese authorities to host refugees from Ethiopia, though infrastructure in the camp remains minimal to date and conditions are poor.<sup>3</sup>



## KEY FINDINGS

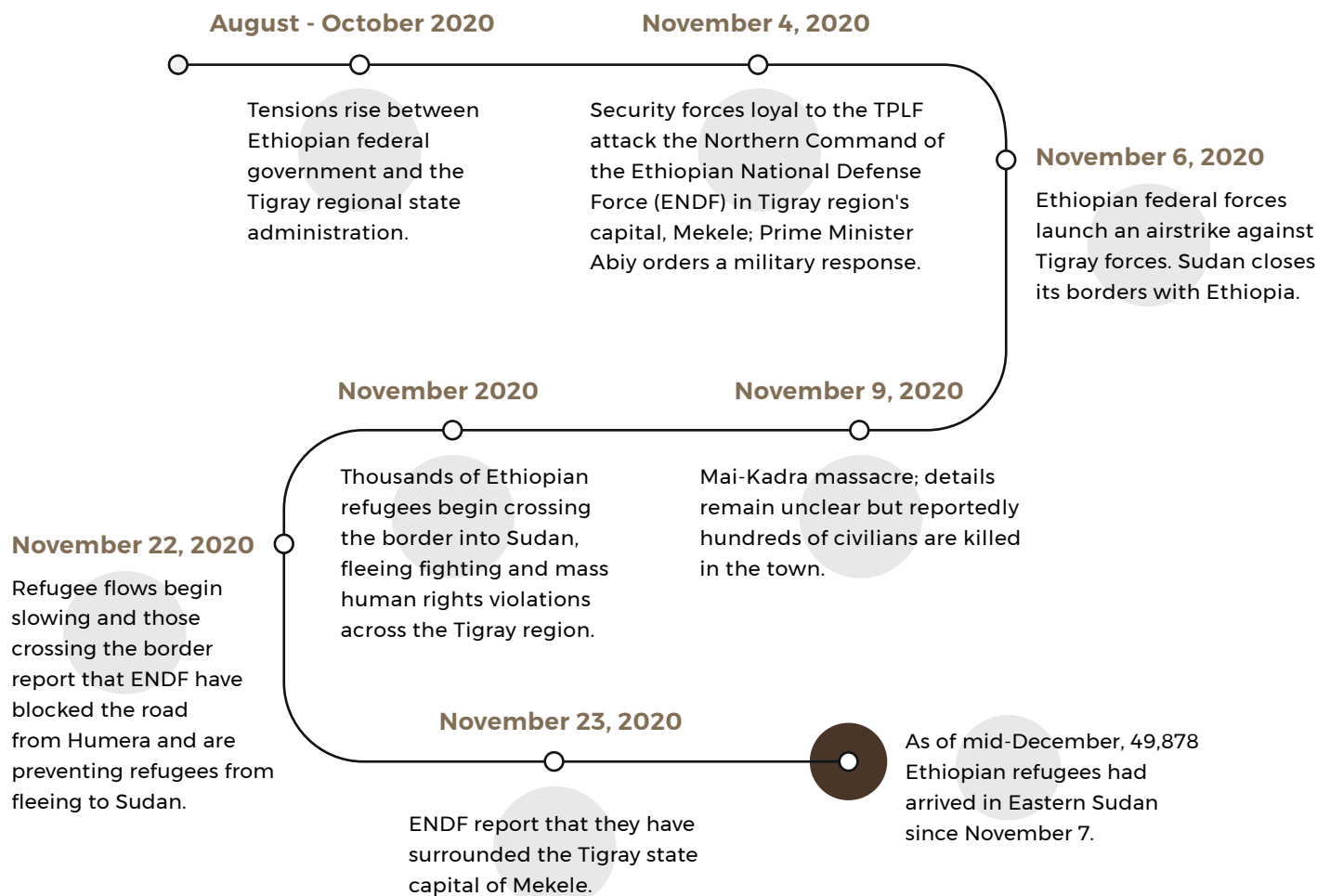
- The scale of atrocities and the targeting of civilians was not anticipated and caught the population by surprise.
- Multiple state and non-state combatants are operating, often in coordination, throughout the Tigray region. These include the ENDF, Eritrean state military, regional military forces from Ahmara and Tigray states, armed ethnic militia, and opportunistic bandits.
- Accounts from interviewed refugees suggest targeting of medical facilities.
- Human rights violations and atrocities were perpetrated based on ethnic targeting.
- Looting and theft, both by military forces and opportunistic thieves, appears to have been widespread.
- The threat of forced recruitment has been a motivating factor for refugees to flee.
- Displaced people were targeted and interrogated on their route to find safety, first in their home areas, and then along dangerous routes to the Sudan border.
- Refugee flows appear to include individuals from all sectors of society, including all age groups and all income groups.
- Most refugees have been separated from family as a result of displacement and do not yet have access to family tracing.
- Conditions in both Hamdayet and Um Rakuba settlement sites were dire at the time of interviews, with inadequate food, unsafe water (especially in Hamdayet), and inadequate shelter.
- Multiple humanitarian organizations are on the ground attempting to enhance infrastructure and services under crisis conditions, but the conditions inside Sudan and the inaccessibility of the areas where refugees are concentrated make such service provision extremely challenging.
- Refugees report significant material and moral support from the local host communities, and report that they feel safe and welcomed by the Sudanese people.

1. Sudan Eastern Border: Update on Daily New Arrivals from Ethiopia. UNHCR, 11 Dec. 2020, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/144?geo=295&sv=0>.

2. Hodal, Kate, and Jason Burke. "Ethiopia Fighting Could Drive 200,000 to Sudan in Coming Months, Says UN." The Guardian, 20 Nov. 2020. [www.theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/20/ethiopia-fighting-could-drive-200000-flee-sudan-coming-month-un), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/20/ethiopia-fighting-could-drive-200000-flee-sudan-coming-month-un>.

3. Refugees, United Nations High Commissioner for. "Pace of Ethiopian Refugee Arrivals in Sudan Unseen in the Last Two Decades." UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2020/11/5fb391214/pace-ethiopian-refugee-arrivals-sudan-unseen-decades.html>. Accessed 11 Dec. 2020.

## TIMELINE



## DETAILED FINDINGS FROM REFUGEE INTERVIEWS

## “PEOPLE WERE EXPECTING A WAR, BUT NOTHING LIKE THIS.”

- Key informant

While many in Ethiopia and across the globe feared an outbreak of conflict after months of escalating tensions, the ferocity of attacks, the involvement of multiple state and non-state actors, as well as the utter devastation and loss of life has shocked all observers. For the thousands of Tigrayans (and other Ethiopians) who fled across the border into Sudan, the situation has led to widespread human rights violations, including atrocities and war crimes that will require long-term investigation and accountability over the coming months and years.

The following describes preliminary findings from Sayara's qualitative research with Tigray refugees. It is important to note that reports from reputable organizations indicate that atrocities have been committed by all sides in the conflict. The accounts in this brief are from Tigray refugees and, accordingly, are based solely on their experiences. Sayara has not independently verified the claims made by the refugees, but we present these findings to document the lived experiences and the perceptions of those fleeing the conflict.



## FORCED TO FLEE

“THE ARTILLERY WAS FALLING  
ON US IN HUMERA.”

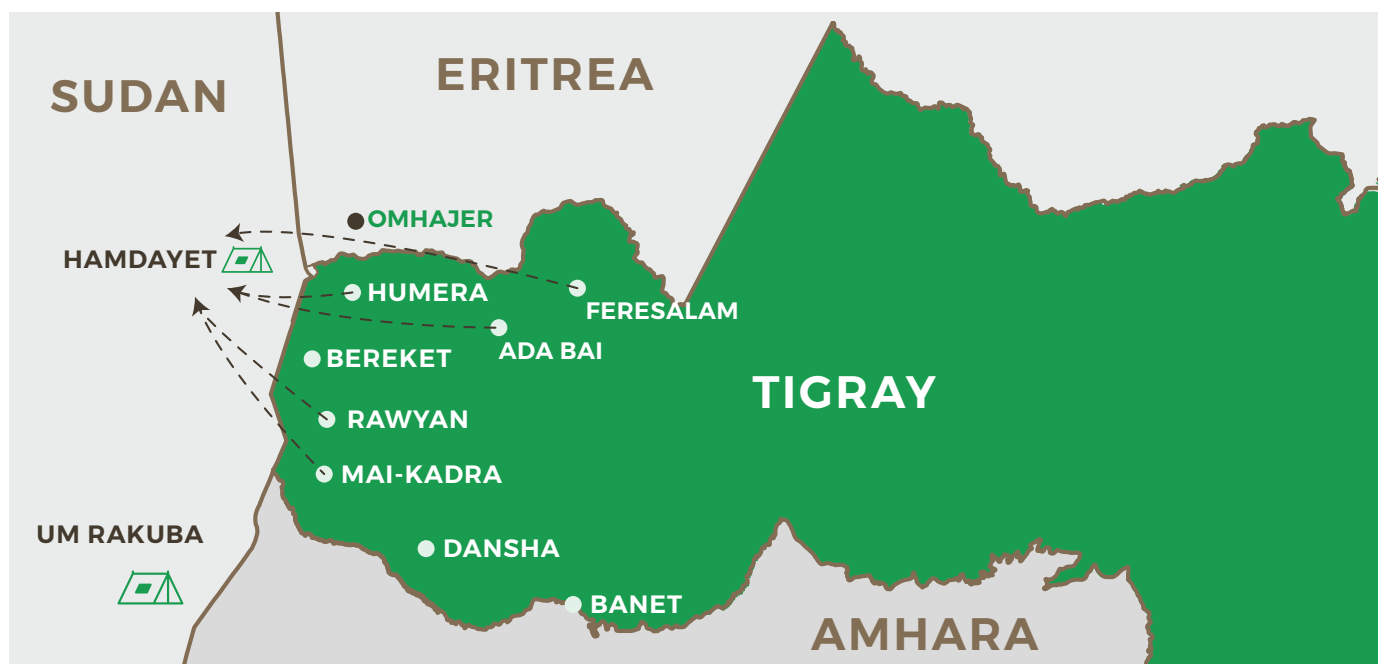
- 18-year-old male goat farmer

The scale of atrocities and the targeting of civilians was unanticipated and caught the population by surprise. Tigrayans who recounted their experiences to Sayara described totally unexpected chaos and confusion as they fled for their lives from bombardment, attacks by military forces, as well as militia-led ethnic targeting. The refugees were highly traumatized, and many were unable to fully recount their experiences, but the details they were

able to share provide a glimpse into a conflict that bears many of the hallmarks of being fueled by long-standing political interests and simmering ethnic grievances.

Tigrayan refugees were completely unprepared for the onslaught by the ethnic Amhara militia group, the Fano. One 28-year-old female small business owner described her anger that the local Tigray administration had not warned the people that the militia were coming for them; she blamed that lack of warning for the deaths and other human rights violations perpetrated against the Tigrayans in Humera.

## BOMBARDMENT AND ATTACKS ON CIVILIAN FACILITIES



Refugees described heavy artillery fire coming from Omhajer, across the border in Eritrea, and lasting for hours during the nights. Despite the recent normalization of relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which led to the award of a Nobel Peace Prize for Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy, there has been widespread reporting of the role of Eritrean forces in the conflict in Tigray.

At least one refugee described the scene at a hospital in Humera that was hit by artillery. A 25-year-old male day laborer recounted watching his friend being shot in front of him and then trying to take friends and injured family to the hospital. However, the hospital complex was under heavy bombardment and the medical staff themselves were fleeing, leaving patients and wounded unattended as staff attempted to find safety. He estimated that more than 100 people had died, that he was aware of, in the initial bombardment and that there were no medical services due to the attack on the hospital.



## ETHNIC TARGETING

### “THEY WERE ASKING IF YOU ARE AMHARIC OR TIGRAY.”

- 28-year-old female small business owner

The refugees Sayara spoke with all resided in Western Tigray prior to the conflict, a region where the Sudan, Eritrea, Tigray State, and Amhara State borders intersect and are partly disputed. While the majority of the population in Tigray is ethnic Tigrayan, other communities

from diverse Ethiopian ethnic groups also reside in the state. Refugees repeatedly recounted that they fled after being threatened with “slaughter” and after being identified by their neighbors who were collaborating with other ethnic communities.

“Four of my siblings had died when the artillery hit our home. Welketut [collaborators] and Fano were saying that they don’t want to see any Tigray and we will slaughter you.” - 18-year-old male goat farmer

Another refugee, a 30-year-old male electrician, said “the killing was only for Tigray people.” A 34-year-old male delivery truck driver described witnessing “a friend of ours who went to get property and his sister. They (Fano militia) killed him.” A 28-year-old male trader said that “when tanks arrived at Banet, Amharic [soldiers] and *welketetu* were telling the Tigray people that you are going to die and we’re taking your property. Some Tigray died; others were injured.”

## DESTITUTION, LOOTING, AND THEFT

### “WE CAME WITH NOTHING.”

- 55-year-old female civil servant

Looting and theft, both by military forces and opportunistic bandits and thieves, was widespread. Refugees described fleeing their homes with nothing, leaving all their personal possessions behind, some without even being able to change out of their pajamas. A young law student lamented having to leave behind his laptop which was his only link to the studies that he was due to complete in a little over a month. “We left with just the clothes we were wearing,” said a 34-year-old male delivery truck driver.

Several also recounted extensive looting and outright theft of personal property by the Fano ethnic militia and

other combatants. “They took our phones,” said a 25-year-old male day laborer, while an 18-year-old male goat farmer said that “the Amharic took all the cars and motorbikes.” For those who had time to grab property, they were later forced to leave it behind when military forces or militia confronted them and identified them as Tigrayan. Refugees described the militias and soldiers taking all their possessions, even down to the doors from the houses and the windows. They also described seeing animals being herded away and that Eritrean forces were looting Tigrayan factories, houses, and food stores.

Others reported that the ENDF, Amhara official forces, Fano militia, and others were working together, identifying rich people’s homes to be looted and threatening to kill those who didn’t comply and leave all their property behind.

## FORCED RECRUITMENT

At least two of the refugees we spoke to highlighted fears of forced recruitment as a motivating factor for them to flee. One refugee from Rawyan noted that any males who tried to return home were taken to a local meeting and told by the Amhara forces that they would have to become soldiers. Another refugee described leaving home because combatants were forcefully taking youth against their will to military camps. Reports of forced recruitment have also been documented by the United Nations and others.<sup>4</sup>

4. For example, “UN Chief Seeks Immediate Aid Access for Ethiopia’s Tigray,” *Voice of America*, <https://www.voanews.com/africa/un-chief-seeks-immediate-aid-access-ethiopia-tigray>.

Accessed 11 Dec. 2020; “Reporters - Exiled in Sudan, Tigray Refugees Face New Struggle for Survival,” *France 24*, 4 Dec. 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/reporters/20201204-exiled-in-sudan-tigray-refugees-face-new-struggle-for-survival>.

## THE JOURNEY TO SUDAN

### “I DID NOT THINK I WILL COME THROUGH ALIVE.”

- 55-year-old female civil servant

Displaced people were targeted and interrogated on their route to find safety along dangerous routes to the Sudan border. Refugees describe a harrowing journey through the bush and forests of Western Tigray, attempting to avoid well-traveled roads and urban areas to escape detection by the Fano militia and unaffiliated bandits along the way. The sounds of gunfire and the battle followed them along the route, as they traveled with elderly family members, pregnant women, and children. Some traveled in large groups of 30 or more people, hoping for safety in numbers.

Refugees recounted first trying to flee within Ethiopia, but they soon recognized that the situation was untenable. “We went to Shelella and stayed there for four days. Then the Fano came to us there, there was shooting, and we ran away to arrive at Hamdayet,” said a 32-year-old male livestock farmer. He fled initially with a group of 40 people, though only ten of them ultimately made it to the Tekeze River crossing after an attack from the Fano and other combatants. A 30-year-old male electrician fled “first from Humera to Sheraro on foot, then there was shooting in Sheraro; that’s why I returned back to Humera with my mother and wife. I came to Hamdayet through the wilderness and avoided the cities.” A law student from Mai-Kadra recounted that he travelled to Ada Bai, from which place he set out for Hamdayet. The entire journey took him more than ten hours on foot and he was robbed of all his money along the way by the Fano militia.

For others who were traveling with their elderly parents or children, the trip took days, and required hiding in the bush and sleeping out in the forest en route. Unable to take anything with them, they traveled hungry. A 34-year-old male delivery truck driver narrated: “I first went to Ada Bai. I then went back to Rawyan through all the shooting that was taking place. I came on foot, I was hiding in a car in Rawyan. When the Fano entered Humera, we left for Hamdayet. We crossed the water for free because I didn’t have money on me. I came with my family - me, my wife, my son, and my mother.”

Throughout the journey, refugees described being continuously afraid of meeting the Fano militia who were extorting phones and money, but who were also carrying out arbitrary killings. In addition, ENDF were checking identification at checkpoints throughout the region. One refugee described his encounter with the ENDF in Dema: “They said ‘where are you going?’ and we answered ‘our family are in Hamdayet, that’s why we are going there.’ But

they said ‘why would you leave your country, you have to go back,’ and we told them that we would not go back. They told us that ‘you Tigrayans were the problem-makers in the first place.’” After being turned back, the group of refugees eventually went to a different river crossing that was not patrolled and made their way to Hamdayet.

## FAMILY SEPARATION

Refugees described fear and distress about the fate of family members and friends from whom they had been separated during the initial attacks in Humera or during their journey to Sudan. “I took some of my family, my mother and wife, I don’t know about the rest of my family,” a 30-year-old male electrician told us. Another refugee requested that “the Red Cross should tell us the situation of our relatives, because we don’t know.” This and their other experiences have led to extreme sadness and depression.





## TEKEZE RIVER CROSSING

The refugees who spoke to Sayara had all traveled across the Tekeze River to reach Hamdayet in Sudan. The Tekeze is a fast-moving waterway and presents a dangerous crossing without a motor-powered boat. Refugees who had money paid to cross in wooden boats, while others waded or swam with the help of other Tigrayans. Still others used empty jerry cans as

rafts to float themselves to the safe side. Others were aided by Sudanese who helped them to get across for free. The welcome on the Sudanese side, according to those Sayara interviewed, was a warm one. One refugee noted that they had been met with water and dates when they emerged from the river, a traditional symbol of Sudanese hospitality.

**“I WAS ABLE TO SLEEP WELL AND EAT. I AM HAPPY.”**

- 55-year-old female civil servant

## HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN EASTERN SUDAN

**“I WILL GO BACK AS SOON AS THERE IS PEACE IN MY COUNTRY.”**

- student from Mai-Kadra

Once the refugees reached safety in Eastern Sudan, they found themselves in an extremely inaccessible area with few existing services. Hamdayet village, now

hosting a refugee transit camp, is a 10-hour car journey from Khartoum, on dirt track roads and by boat where there are river crossings. The climate is arid with limited food and water resources. The humanitarian situation is dire, according to the refugees Sayara spoke with, but they feel safe and have no desire to return to Ethiopia until hostilities have ceased. One refugee described how the Sudanese in Hamdayet “are encouraging us and telling us that things will pass.”

## CONDITIONS IN HAMDAYET

Refugees reported to Sayara that multiple organizations were on the ground providing at least some services, including the Red Cross, UNHCR, UNICEF, Qatar Foundation, and others.

Refugees reported having no shelter in Hamdayet, one describing how he had slept under a porch. Refugees have spread throughout the town as well as in the temporary transit center set up by aid agencies. The UN had provided several of the refugees that Sayara spoke to with blankets, straw rugs, soap, and

sanitary supplies for women. The area where the UN was providing services was overcrowded and some of those people interviewed noted that they could not access food or a place to sleep because there was a crush of people and jostling for supplies. Refugees reported drinking water collected from the Tekeze River and using the same unclean water for both drinking and washing. Others noted that they were receiving some food from the humanitarian aid agencies, including porridge and lentils.

“They give tents and blankets, but the strong ones take it, we are weak. I went to get the blanket, but there was a mess and I couldn’t get one because I was weak.” - 55-year-old female civil servant

Most refugees do not have money, though some have been given donations from members of the community in Hamdayet and others have been able to receive money from friends and relatives in Khartoum or abroad. Those with money are able to buy food locally, but many have no means of cooking what they buy.

A 32-year-old male livestock farmer commented: “We are in Hamdayet town. We share money for food for breakfast, then we go to the Red Cross for porridge. At night, we listen to news and some music. We share money for dinner then go to sleep. We sleep on the ground in the open. There is no work, I have nothing with me here so I can’t live here.”

“The Sudanese helped us. They gave us places to sleep, beds, all for free.” - 25-year-old male day laborer.

## CONDITIONS IN UM RAKUBA

### “I FEEL STRESSED, BUT I DON’T HAVE FEAR NOW.”

- 28-year-old male trader

Refugees have been transported via vehicle to Um Rakuba Refugee Camp to the south. Refugees in Um Rakuba described the conditions there as somewhat

better than Hamdayet, especially regarding access to clean water which was being delivered by truck. Food and shelter remain scarce, however, with tents provided only for the most vulnerable, such as women with children. Refugees reported receiving food in the form of two meals per day of porridge and lentils. The refugees do not have access to any electricity in the camp. In recent days, the UN reported shipments of tents and blankets arriving in Um Rakuba.

Refugees in Um Rakuba reported feeling safe in Sudan and that they felt welcomed by the Sudanese. However, one refugee mentioned that there is little security around the camps, and he is beginning to fear that unauthorized people will be able to gain access and cause problems. Moreover, multiple reports have identified significant shortages and problems of administration in the camp.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### IMMEDIATE

- Basic humanitarian assistance for refugees is a critical priority. Refugee accounts reflect insufficient access to food, water, and shelter. Humanitarian actors, the government of Sudan, and their partners must immediately scale up efforts to meet their international obligations to provide humanitarian assistance to refugees.
- Cessation of conflict and restoration of humanitarian access to Tigray in Ethiopia is critical. Regional bodies such as the African Union, international diplomatic missions, and other influential stakeholders must continue to apply pressure on the Ethiopian government to reach a resolution that brings a stop to the fighting and violations against civilians.

### URGENT

- Effective reception and registration of refugees must be put into place. Refugee registration should be subject to independent monitoring.
- Financial support and public commendation should be provided to the Sudanese host communities who are welcoming refugees, in order to maintain positive relations between refugee and host communities and reduce the possibility of future conflict.
- A family tracing program should be urgently put into effect, to support reunification and provide information about the whereabouts of missing persons.

### AS SOON AS POSSIBLE

- An independent, expert investigation of the Mai-Kadra massacre, as well as other atrocities that may come to light, should be supported and facilitated by the government of Ethiopia with support and technical assistance from intergovernmental bodies such as the African Union.
- Mechanisms to monitor relations between host communities and refugees should be put in place to provide early warning and mitigation of any potential conflicts.
- Support should be provided for ongoing research with refugees inside Sudan, including specific documentation of the experiences and needs of highly vulnerable groups such as children, women, the elderly, people with disabilities, and ethnic minorities.
- Processes to document accounts of arbitrary and extrajudicial killings, gender-based violence, forced recruitment, attacks on civilian targets (specifically medical facilities), and other widespread human rights violations and war crimes should be undertaken to support future accountability mechanisms.

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## ABOUT SAYARA INTERNATIONAL

**Sayara International** is a global development firm that specializes in the design and implementation of rigorous research, social and behavior change communication, approaches to countering disinformation, and governance strategies in fragile, conflict-affected and transitioning societies.

Founded in 2003, Sayara operates in 30 countries across Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Sayara supports the programming of our clients and partners with complex and sustainable research, evaluation, data-driven policy change, crisis management, and humanitarian response in the most challenging environments, working with and for the most vulnerable communities worldwide. Sayara's origins in conflict and the company's evolution across fragile contexts have equipped us with a set of values, core operating principles, systems, and competencies unique in the global development industry.

Using in-depth local knowledge and innovative designs, Sayara conducts research that allows our partners to manage their resources for maximum impact in the field. We provide our clients with the research and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) services to inform more effective and relevant decision-making, intervention design, and implementation.

Sayara's office in Sudan comprises 15 staff and a network of experts and field researchers in all of Sudan's states. Sayara Sudan's clients include DT Global, Embassy of France in Sudan, Expertise France, GIZ, IOM, ITAD, Italian Cooperation, RVO, U.S. State Department, and USAID.

Our teams of professionals are based in field offices in Beirut, Kabul, Khartoum, Kyiv, Medellin, and Nairobi, with support from our offices in London, Warsaw, and Paris, and our headquarters in Washington, D.C.

🖱️ For more information about Sayara's work globally and in Sudan, visit [www.sayarainternational.com](http://www.sayarainternational.com).

✉️ For questions about our Sudan operations, please contact Mr. Bakry Osman (Director – Sudan) via [bakry@sayarainternational.com](mailto:bakry@sayarainternational.com).

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